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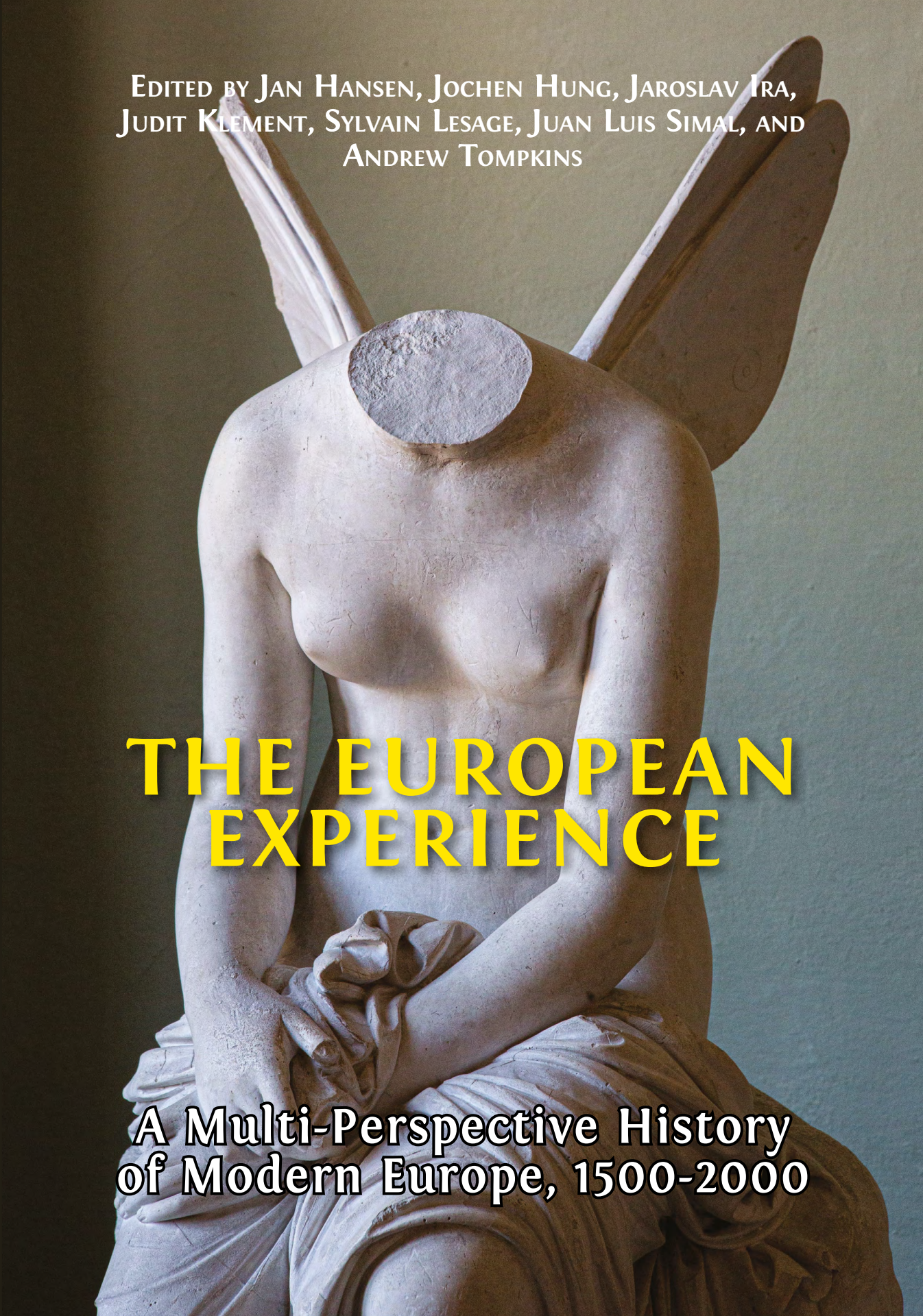

The European Experience

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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5.4.1 Labour and Forced Labour in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Mikołaj Malinowski and Stephan Sander-Faes

Introduction

Any inquest into the role of pre-industrial labour may well begin with the reminder that the subject is neither as clear-cut nor as neatly distinguishable as it may appear. 'Labour' used to refer primarily to agricultural work, especially physical toil, which constituted the mainstay of pre-industrial production. The emergence of proto-industry in the early modern period witnessed a gradual, if non-linear, shift in employment structures, which corresponds to a secular decline of the agricultural workforce.

Analytically, 'labour' covered a wide spectrum that ranged from free (voluntary) wage labour to various forms of unfree labour determined by a combination of property rights and an individual's legal status. The degrees of freedom were determined by taxation levels, landownership, labour rents and services, legal status, and individual dependencies, including temporary limitations (e.g., military conscription, convict labour), various grades of subjection, and personal unfreedom (slavery). Though their diffusion varied considerably across time and space, these overlapping types of labour were found all over Europe: (a) free labour (un-/skilled labour), (b) partially free labour (tenurial relations, incl. serfdom), and (c) unfree labour (e.g., convicts, slaves).

Occupational Structures

The idea of a dualism between 'free' and 'unfree' labour is closely correlated to a number of assumed structural characteristics, such as the urban-rural divide and the socio-economic divergence between Eastern and Western Europe. One must further differentiate between two interlocking long-term trends that played out differently across time and space: the population crash of the late Middle Ages in the wake of the Black Death (1348) that disproportionately

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affected the more urbanised areas of Western Europe, which—in part due to ensuing labour shortages—experienced rising real wages and thus moved towards an extensification of (agricultural) production. Eastern Europe, which was less urbanised, was comparatively less affected in socio-economic terms.

Scholars continue to dispute and debate the driving force behind European economic development during the early modern period. Explanations range from material production to military competition, from higher levels of productivity ('industriousness') to the institutional framework, and from fiscal-financial innovation to a range of cultural traits. Whatever the ultimate causes, there exists a wealth of empirical evidence that documents gradual, if non-linear, shifts in population and occupational structures, as well as labour productivity in both Eastern and Western Europe from the late Middle Ages through the early modern period.

Despite increasingly organised warfare, demographic reconstructions indicate that Europe's population roughly doubled between 1500 and 1800. Both England and the Low Countries were outliers in these trends, with much larger increases in urban and rural non-agricultural sectors. Europe's agricultural population grew less and averaged ca. thirty-five to thirty-nine percent during the same period. Recent reconstructions of economic output reveal strikingly similar patterns of low growth all across Europe. These results are buttressed by largely analogous trends in fertility, life expectancy, and mortality, all of which remained virtually constant throughout the early modern period.

Taken together, these findings reveal an ambiguous image of early modern Europe. While population increased everywhere, growth was most pronounced in England and the Low Countries. Demographic growth affected all sectors, with most indicators pointing to small differences in the increase of the agricultural population. By contrast, the rural non-agricultural sectors show much larger variation, with growth ranging from a low thirty percent in Southern Europe to much higher growth indicators in the Low Countries, Poland, and England.

In terms of population distribution by sector (urban, rural non-agricultural, agricultural), the following trends across early modern Europe are apparent. Around 1500, urbanisation outside Northern Italy (twenty-two percent) and the Low Countries (twenty-eight to twenty-nine percent) averaged less than ten percent. Early modern Europe's rural non-agricultural population averaged around eighteen percent of the workforce, with the agricultural population standing at roughly three quarters. By contrast, around 1750, urbanisation rates of about twenty-two to twenty-three percent are documented for England, Belgium, Northern Italy, and Spain, with the Netherlands firmly in the lead at thirty-six percent. Even more significant changes had occurred in

the two other sectors, with the rural non-agricultural population in the North Sea Region averaging around twenty-seven to twenty-eight percent, with no discernible changes from 1500 levels in Southern Europe. Still, there occurred an overall decline of Europe's agricultural population, which fell to around sixty percent, with even lower rates in England and the Low Countries at around forty-five percent.

These shifts occurred as Europe's population grew from around 70 million (1500) to around 130 million (1800). Demographic change was neither steady nor geographically uniform, with marked increases before the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) and after the mid-eighteenth century. Still, it is also an indicator of—at least—commensurate increases of economic output, and thus it may serve as a crude proxy for overall productivity gains.

From the late medieval period onwards, Europeans achieved incremental gains in agricultural and manufacturing output (glass, textiles, printing), seafaring, science (observation, theory), and material accumulation that to a certain degree exceeded population growth. These advances varied widely, did not last, and differed considerably from region to region, depending mainly on the natural environment and pre-existing social formations (social orders) as well as the availability of resources and labour.

Most proto-industrial enterprises (e.g., mining, processing) were typically concentrated outside urban centres and made use of all kinds of labour (e.g., free, partially free, and/or unfree labour). Economic activity relied virtually exclusively on organic materials (wood) and traditional energy inputs (muscle, water, and wind power). Hence, productivity gains were often the consequence of organisational modifications of societal command and control differentials, which manifested themselves differently, ranging from incentivised pressures to increased authority of the landowners. In short, as early modern Europe's output increased, its labour force also grew more regimented and disciplined.

Free Wage Labour

Free labour refers to individuals and groups who sold their labour to the highest bidder in exchange for a daily, monthly, or annual wage. While free workers may refrain from engaging in any kind of labour, a lack of savings and the need to sustain themselves served as primary incentives to enter the labour market. In a competitive labour market, wages received would be determined by one's marginal productivity, therefore—at least in theory—the more productive a worker was, the higher the wage that worker would receive.

Before the Industrial Revolution, productivity gains were due to skills and specialisation rather than technological improvements. Labour may further be subdivided into unskilled and skilled workers, who possessed different levels

of human capital. Training in early modern Europe was regimented by guilds that restricted both the supply of skilled labour and output, thus regulating prices. Workers had to go through years of apprenticeship to become certified craftsmen. Due to the high training costs, wage differences between skilled and unskilled workers—constituting a so-called 'skill premium'—were high.

Unskilled labourers constituted the majority of the free wage earners. Data on the daily wages of construction workers from across Europe serves as a helpful proxy for their living standards. They were typically among the poorest urban dwellers. Nominal wages (received for their labour) increased across early modern Europe, but this rise was a result of the inflation caused by the inflow of precious metals from the Americas. At the same time, basic prices (food, housing, clothing) rose even faster, contributing to (at best) stagnation or decline in levels of income.

Wages of unskilled workers were high in the period directly after the Black Death (1348). The low availability of labour and its higher marginal productivity (in theory, less available labour equals fewer diminishing returns to any extra unit of labour and thus higher wages) initiated what is known as the 'golden age of labour' in preindustrial Europe. However, on the whole—everywhere outside the Low Countries and England—wages ultimately declined during the early modern period. The most common explanation is population growth, or the so-called 'Malthusian trap': productivity gains were eventually offset by demographic pressures, which drove down wages while also leading to higher food prices and lower overall living standards. Comparatively speaking, the North Sea region continued to increase agricultural output and maintain higher standards of living for longer than the rest of the continent. This was due to the use of animal power and manure to increase farm productivity, which in turn provided the means to offset population growth by importing grains. Yet, despite these productivity gains, wages of agricultural workers remained below those in the cities, which further stimulated urbanisation in the long run.

Higher wages in cities meant that more labourers could use their purchasing power to afford education. By one estimate, between 1500 and 1800 literacy in England and the Netherlands increased from six to ten percent to fifty-three to sixty-eight percent, respectively. By contrast, wages in Southern and Eastern Europe remained lower as were literacy rates, which remained below twenty percent. At the same time, a greater supply of skilled labour explains the lower skill premium in the North Sea region. As higher wages also imply higher opportunity costs for not working, this constellation may explain the emergence of what scholarship calls the industrious revolution: it is held that higher wages afforded skilled workers the ability to buy imported goods (tea, coffee, sugar), which served as direct 'rewards' for their higher productivity.

Fig. 1: Medieval illustration of men harvesting wheat with reaping-hooks, on a calendar page for August. Queen Mary's Psalter (Ms. Royal 2. B. VII), Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Reeve_and_Serfs.jpg.

Partially Free Labour: Tenurial Relations, Subjection, and Serfdom

While cities offered many opportunities for free labour, rural areas were typically characterised by various forms of partially free labour. Despite the decline of Europe's agricultural working population, the overwhelming majority of farmers and leaseholders tilled plots they did not own in their own name. Typically, ownership was concentrated in the hands of either the ecclesiastical or secular landlords, who could either be legal (e.g., convents, corporations) or natural persons (individuals). This system of property ownership revolved around the consignation of payment (rent) in exchange for land use (usufruct) rights, and it is known as 'land tenure'. Historically, the system can be traced back to the Middle Ages. It existed until the French Revolution West of the Rhine, and East of the Rhine it continued well into the second half of the nineteenth century.

Throughout the early modern period, the multi-dimensional personal relationship between landlord and the resident tenant population continued to predominate. Scholarship refers to this highly variegated system as 'demesne lordship': a distinct power hierarchy deriving mainly from property relations and tenurial status, which could also include various forms of personal bondage of the tenant (and his family) to the landowner. This basic principle was found all over early modern Europe, although it varied widely in its concrete manifestations according to regional and local circumstances. This

relationship is known as 'subjection'—meaning the legal status of domination of landlords over the resident population. This status was primarily connected to landownership, but it could also extend to the administration of justice by the landlord and, in its most hierarchical expressions, included control over subjects' marital states, succession duties, as well as mobility restrictions.

While tenurial relations and subjection characterised all of Europe, 'serfdom' had a much more limited geographical extent. Under serfdom, the landowner concentrated in their hands powers of land tenure, the administration of justice, and personal bondage. Unlike tenurial relations or subjection, the landlord enjoyed much greater discretion over the resident serfs, including the specific right to acquire, sell, and/or transfer serfs from one property title to another. Serfdom as a social system evolved most fully in parts of Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg and (Western) Pomerania, in the Baltics (present-day Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Russia, Moldavia, and Wallachia, as well as—to a lesser degree—in parts of Hungary and Transylvania. The central element of serfdom was economic co-dependency, which meant that both lords *and* serfs enjoyed rights and mutual obligations, such as the landlord's duty to help their serfs in times of hardship, famine, disease, and war in exchange for the serfs' labour duties. Because serfdom resurfaced in these regions after a period of relative decline in the late Middle Ages, scholarship also refers to these phenomena as 'refeudalisation' or the 'second serfdom'.

Another distinction which emerged over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between tenurial relations, subjection, and serfdom derives from the fact that in some regions there also existed forms of 'hereditary subjection', meaning that the landlords' power automatically extended over the tenants' children. While this practice existed all across Europe, additional burdens deriving from it were greater in East-Central Europe, especially in terms of forced labour rents (*corvée*, or *robota*/*robot*).

Apart from the changing normative frameworks that governed these relationships, the practices of subjection and serfdom in particular varied greatly across time and space. There exists no single legislative or executive act that unambiguously and unchangingly established either as a 'system' in any area. Conditions and relations between property owners and the resident population changed gradually, if in a non-linear fashion, and the characteristics of these mutual ties were continually changing as well.

Seigneurial interference with the tenants' freedom of mobility, the administration of justice, property rights, and (forced) labour rents manifested themselves differently across early modern Europe. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, tighter control was imposed over the landlords' own titles—their 'demesne lordship', i.e., those areas that were not cultivated by the tenants. Obviously, the local availability of resources, climatic conditions, and

the possibilities (and limitations) of preindustrial production influenced the varying manifestations of the demesne economy. From the eighteenth century onwards, however, expansion of the state power gradually encroached on the sway held by the landlords over the resident population, a process which coincided with the liberalisation of labour relations.

Unfree Labour: Slavery, Indentured Servitude, Convicts, and Conscription

Apart from these two analytical groups, there existed a third category in early modern Europe, which consisted of individuals or groups that could neither decide on the type of work they carried out, nor enjoy freedom of movement: these were slaves, indentured servants, convicts, and conscripts.

The institution of slavery is about as old as civilisation itself, and it denotes people who were the personal property of their owners and could be bought, transferred, and sold at will. Under Roman Law, a slave was defined as anyone who had either been captured in battle, been born to an enslaved mother, been sentenced to slavery as a criminal punishment, or who had sold themselves to redeem debts. Infidels, heretics, and pagans could also be enslaved. While many of these legal stances withered away over the course of the Middle Ages, indentured servants (who did unpaid work to repay debt, a condition of subjugation which carried across generations) as well as convicts remained an important source of labour. While serfdom might also fit (partially) into this category, both convicts and indentured servitude possessed even less freedom of action. Through history, unfree labour was a crucial source of largely unskilled labour in agriculture, construction, transportation, entertainment, and warfare, even though there were also skilled slaves who often performed vital administrative tasks.

In the Middle Ages, the spread of Christianity and canon law gradually limited slavery in most of Europe. While non-Christians could still be enslaved, Christianity forbade Christians from holding other Christians as slaves. The disappearance of enslaved Christians facilitated the emergence of the various forms of partially free labour. These developments were more fully complete in Western Europe, with England abolishing the slave trade in 1102; however, in Russia, slavery remained legal until 1723.

Slavery as an institution continued to exist in Europe and its colonies, although it remained limited to non-Christians or tied to personal indebtedness (chattel slavery). In Europe, non-Christian (and often black) slaves were frequently 'collected' by powerful rulers, while in the Ottoman Empire slavery remained a common practice. The most (in-)famous form of slavery in the Ottoman Empire was the *devşirme*, or 'blood tax', which referred to the forcible

induction of Balkan Christian children into the Ottoman state institutions, especially the administration and the elite Janissary corps.

European expansion from the eleventh century onwards also made use of slave labour. While there were strong continuities with (late) antiquity, the Crusades gave Christian proprietors the opportunity to construct a (partially) slave-powered overseas plantation economy (oriented around cotton, rice, and sugar cane). At first located mainly in the (Eastern) Mediterranean, the systematic use and subsequent importation of slaves on a large scale to toil in overseas mines and plantations was eventually employed across the Atlantic from the fifteenth century onwards.

The discovery of the Americas and the sea route to the Indian Ocean gave rise to European colonialism, which became a major driving force in the diffusion and growth of the triangular slave trade between Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Between 1519 and 1867, around twelve to thirteen million enslaved Africans were sold to Portuguese, British, French, Dutch, and Spanish merchants and forcibly relocated across the Atlantic. Competition among West African states was at the root of the Atlantic slave trade, which was fuelled by the exchange of slaves for European weapons and goods. This dynamic led to a vicious cycle with severe long-term consequences for economic development.

As elsewhere, slavery in the Americas was dreadful, with the overwhelming majority of enslaved people ending up on Caribbean and South American plantations and mines owned by Western European proprietors and investors. especially from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. Slaves were used to produce export commodities (such as cotton, or sugar molasses) to be consumed by high-earning wage labourers in Northwestern Europe. These dynamics paved the way for the eventual emergence of a second triangular trade that saw European manufactured goods such as textiles exported to Africa and the Americas in exchange for slaves and plantation products, respectively.

Proprietors, investors, and craftsmen also employed other means to secure inexpensive labour. The two most important categories were 'indentured servitude' (contract-based work without pay for a specified period of time, which included apprenticeships) and convict labour. Indentured workers could be transferred from one employer to another, and these migrant workers constituted a sizeable part of the original population of Britain's colonies in North America. While indentured servitude and debt bondage were intimately related, prisoners of war and convicts were also often shipped overseas.

In warfare, prisoners and convicts were also used as forced labour, with impressment (forced military service) a subset of these categories. From the eighteenth century onwards, capital punishment was gradually replaced by chain gangs and, in more recent times, convict leasing.

Great Britain eventually outlawed the slave trade in 1807, and slavery itself was gradually abolished during the nineteenth century (Denmark-Norway, 1803; United Kingdom, 1833; Brazil, 1888). This was certainly a move towards freer labour relations, but various forms of unfree labour—ranging from universal compulsory conscription (introduced in the 1790s), to convict leasing, and various forms of modern chattel slavery—continue to exist even in the present.

Conclusion

For the most part, the seemingly clear-cut distinction between free and unfree labour obscures the fact that the distinction is in fact one of degree rather than kind. Furthermore, all of these categories were found all over early modern Europe. Research since the 1960s has shown that early modern economic development—as in most contemporary developing countries—hinged on the intensification of labour. Adapted to local and regional circumstances and typically supported by state power, pre-industrial landowners and merchant-capitalists invested in productive capabilities, ranging from agricultural improvements to proto-industrial ventures to integration into long-distance trade. These dynamics were highly variegated and geographically diffuse. Hence, rather than dividing Europe between, for example, (free) western and (unfree) eastern parts, it is more helpful to think about economically active 'hotspots', both rural and urban, embedded within distinctively pre-modern social relations that persisted well into the nineteenth century.

Discussion questions

1. What are the main differences between serfdom and slavery?
2. This chapter argues that the difference between free and unfree labour was gradual in early modern Europe. What does this mean and what were the reasons that the difference was not more pronounced?
3. In which ways does our understanding of labour differ from early modern Europe? Why?

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